DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 176 296 CS 205 135

AUTHOR Ede, Lisa S.
TITLE The Composing Process: What We Know/What We Tell Our Students.
PUB DATE Apr 79
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (30th, Minneapolis, Minnesota, April 5-7, 1979)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Composition (Literary); Creative Writing; Higher Education; *Role Models; Student Writing Models; Teaching Methods; Teaching Models
IDENTIFIERS *Composition Process

ABSTRACT

Empirical and theoretical research and a teacher's own writing experience provide equally valuable resources in the composition classroom. Current research on the composing process suggests a conceptual change from that of a rigid sequence of clearly demarcated stages to a more recursive, hierarchically structured model. Until recently, the role of invention in writing has been ignored. One of the most serious effects of the current/traditional model of the composing process has been its negative influence on students' psychological expectations and attitudes. The teacher's function as a role model is critical in introducing students to the composing process by sharing with them a retrospective protocol of writing experiences, including copies of all scraps and rough drafts. Class members can then be asked to write their own retrospective protocols of the processes they follow in composing. Other methods include reading anecdotes by professional writers about their writing habits and asking ordinary people whose careers involve a fair amount of writing to talk to students. Student writers need to be reminded of the need for flexibility and common sense as they approach the writing process. Implementing these methods may be impeded by large composition class loads, the current teaching assistant system, dependence on part-time staff, and the low regard with which composition teaching is often held by English instructors. (AEA)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH,
EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF
EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

ED176296

The Composing Process: What We Know/What We Tell Our Students

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Lisa S. Ede

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Lisa S. Ede
Department of English
SUNY College at Brockport
Brockport, NY 14420

Address until June, 1979

1401 N. St. Clair, # 7
Pittsburgh, PA 15206

CS 205/35

*This work was partially supported by a NEH Fellowship-in-Residence to study "Rhetorical Invention and the Composing Process" with Richard Young at Carnegie-Mellon University in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

What do we know about the composing process? Until recently, any informed teacher or scholar would have answered "very little indeed." This certainly has been true of one kind of knowledge--sophisticated empirical and theoretical research. Fortunately, during the past few years this dismal situation has begun to change. There is another kind of knowledge, however, one that has been available to us all along--our experiential knowledge as writers. In this paper I will focus on the relationship between these two equally critical kinds of knowledge.

I

Although current research on the composing process must finally be considered rather primitive--with huge territories still relatively unexplored and standards of method and evidence often problematic--certain generalizations seem to hold. The following writers may disagree on particulars, but their descriptions of the general shape of the composing process are surprisingly consistent:

> [The composing process] moves forward and backward between synthesis and analysis. How often this recycling occurs depends on the writer's commitment, preparation, and time limitations.[1]

> Stage process models have little to say about the act of writing itself because they are based not on a study of the process of writing but the product....If we were to study the composing process from the inside perspective we would see that the tasks of planning, retrieving information, creating new ideas, producing language, and revising it are

> all intimately and rather untidily organized together.[2]

> As one composes, one is sumultaneously forced into a multiplicity of roles--writer, reader, discoverer, censor, critic, editor; ideas are constantly being defined, selected, rejected, evaluated, organized.[3]

The implications of changing our conception of the composing process from that of a fairly rigid sequence of clearly demarcated stages to a more recursive, hierarchically structured model are immense. Obviously, caution in interpreting results is necessary. Even at this early point, however, it seems clear--to me, at least--that one of the most serious effects of the current-traditional model of the composing process has been its negative influence on students' psychological expectations and attitudes. Suppose you had been given the following advice, all gleaned from textbooks currently in use, and had believed it?

> If a writer knows what he wants to do in a piece of writing and how to do it, this sense of purpose will lead to the right choices.[4]

> Revision is a process which comes at the end of theme writing.[5]

> Although a short, informal theme can sometimes be written from a few brief jottings, most papers require a more disciplined outline.[6]

> You will start by learning how to find a thesis, which will virtually organize your essay for you ....If you do not find a thesis, your essay will be a tour through the miscellaneous.[7]

What does such advice tell students, implicitly, about

the composing process? All the real, tough work seems to occur at the beginning, before you begin to write. If you can only "find" the "right" thesis--a process which must strike students as something akin to salvation by grace alone--then everything else will be easy. After that, it's a matter of sticking to your outline and saving an hour or so at the end to tidy things up. (Tellingly, for all our emphasis on getting ideas "right" from the very first, until recently we've ignored the role of invention in writing.)

Students who believe what we have told them about composing yet fail to approximate it in their own experience must feel that they are burdened with some secret sin which prevents them from gaining access to this obviously semi-divine process. Students who don't believe us, who know that the neat headings ("find your thesis, sharpen your thesis, believe in your thesis," etc.[8]) in the margins of their text have nothing to do with the way most people write probably become, if they are able, masters of the canned essay, of Engfish.

Either way, their naive, rigid conception of the composing process has potentially destructive results. In an important study of the revision strategies of student and experienced writers, for example, Nancy Sommers found that the students' conception of the writing process clearly influenced their revising habits--largely in negative ways: "Because they do not see revision as an activity on the idea level, and

because they feel that 'conception' precedes in a literal way 'production,' and that they must know before writing what they want to say, they thus feel [that] if they know what they want to say, then there is little reason for making changes."[9] Sommers goes on to argue that the linear model "functions to restrict and circumscribe not only the development of their ideas, but also their ability to change the direction of these ideas."[10] This is in distinct contrast to the strategies of professional writers, whose revising Sommers describes as a "recursive process with different levels of attention and different agenda for each cycle."[11]

II

It seems, then, that students do have assumptions about the composing process--assumptions derived from our texts and our teaching--and that these may often impede, rather than improve, their chances of writing well. What can we do about this? Although anyone who has surveyed our current crop of textbooks realizes that most need major revision we must be wary: canonizing a new model of the composing process too quickly could be just as damaging as leaving texts exactly as they are. For though, as I have argued, the general shape of a model seems to be emerging, a great deal of research remains before we can describe it with much precision or authority. Cooper and Odell's Research on Composing: Points of Departure,

for example, is a vast compendium of unanswered questions about the composing process.[12]

And many difficult pedagogical questions remain. How can you teach a complex process without oversimplifying? What <u>is</u> the difference between simplifying and oversimplifying? How do you teach what seems to be a non-linear, recursive, hierarchically ordered process within the very linear time constraints of the number of minutes in a classroom period, the number of sessions in a term? Even after we have reached some degree of concensus on a model of the composing process, these and related pedagogical problems will continue to demand our attention.

This is precisely where the significance of the second kind of knowledge I mentioned earlier--our experiential knowledge as writers, our <u>personal</u> knowledge (As Michael Polanyi would say)--becomes clear. I do not intend to diminish the importance of work on the composing process, which is one of the most critical areas of research in composition studies today, when I agree with Michael Polanyi that no methodology or model, however rigorous and explicit, will ever be able to specify fully a complex activity such as writing.

Although I do not entirely agree with Polanyi's statement that "all arts are learned by intelligently imitating the way they are practised by other persons in whom the learner places

his confidence,"[13] I do believe that the teacher's function as a role model is critical. This does not mean that students should slavishly ape their teacher's style. Rather, it implies that the teacher demonstrate to students how one who cares deeply about language and writing acts--what questions she asks, how he approaches a difficult problem. When our students come to us from a largely visual, rather than a literary, society such a function may become particularly central.

III

There are a number of more specific methods which teachers can use to introduce students to the composing process. These represent attempts, first of all, to enrich students' assumptions about the process of writing, to give them a more accurate sense of its general shape. Because empirical and theoretical knowledge is still incomplete, I always speak tentatively, urging students to develop working hypotheses based not only on our class discussions, but on their own experiences and those of their peers as well. I also emphasize the enormous variety of particular, or local, strategies that individual writers use, encouraging them to become more introspective about their own writing habits so they can begin to make discriminations about what does and does not work for them.

The most general strategy, as I have suggested, is to present yourself as a working writer--or more accurately, to

be a working writer. This doesn't mean that you have to write fiction, poetry, or professional articles. As we so often tell our students, anyone who writes letters, memos, reports, proposals, etc. is a writer. I don't talk about my writing very often, just when it seems relevant. I try to emphasize that I consider myself "in process," improving in some ways, still confused and uncertain in others, just like my students.

For the past two years I have written a retrospective protocol, or analysis, of most of my important writing experiences. To do so I jot notes about what seems to be happening as I write and try to keep my scraps and drafts in order. After the project is completed, I describe and comment on the whole process. It's also possible to use a tape recorder as you write; this is the technique researchers such as Linda Flower and John Hayes employ in their research. Such a method is impractical for most composing; however, it can be quite instructive as a one-time experiment.

When I share these experiences with my students they are at first shocked, and then greatly relieved, to learn that my composing process varies so from the neat and tidy stages of the model they had internalized. They're often amazed, and even frightened, by how much energy and hard work can go into even a brief paper. But I think they also feel that they may not after all be eternally excluded from this difficult and

complex but also, as I bear witness, most rewarding activity.

Several times I have been able to comment with particular thoroughness on my scraps, notes, and drafts as I composed, and thus could not only write a more than usually complete protocol, but also refer directly to my messy pile of papers. It's worth it, I think, to take a whole class period some time and try to go through a particular writing experience for students. You could use the thermofax to make copies of all or parts of your drafts or, more efficiently perhaps, use an overhead projector.

An obvious offshoot would be to have class members upon occasion write brief retrospective protocols of their own composing process.[14] It might also be helpful to have students, especially advanced students, once or twice keep everything they wrote for a specific essay. The teacher and the student might then be able to analyze the "evidence," trying to see where the writer seems to be working effectively, and where he or she seems to be using limited strategies. Students working in small groups could also perform similar kinds of analysis. Other methods might include: reading anecdotes by professional writers about their writing habits; asking ordinary people whose careers involve a fair amount of writing (other teachers, lawyers, businessmen, etc.) to talk to your students; writing on the same topic you've assigned to your students or, if you

don't use specific topics, working under the same time constraints, and sharing the results.

Perhaps most important, but hardest to discuss, is the need for flexibility and common sense.[15] I have told my students, for example, that I've written papers at the last moment. Still do. But I also tell them that it took years before I could predict when such delaying tactics constituted a reasonable, even highly effective method, given the constraints on my energy and time, and when it was the kind of procrastination that leaves you desperate at 3 AM with coffee nerves and a blank page. My general advice is still the same: given their situation, I urge them to begin their papers early. I think they may finally have greater respect for that caution, and be able to apply it more fruitfully, because they realize that we share a common experience.

I never argue with success: anything that works works. As a constantly remind my students, however, some strategies are clearly easier on mind and body, as well as more productive in the long run, than others. Thus I warn students against cultivating composing habits which are functional in certain limited circumstances, but which may finally prove crippling. The rare bright freshman who announces that he or she has always gotten B's by writing papers the night before they're due needs to be persuaded that although such a practice may work when the assignment is brief, the student may discover

that he or she will be incapable of dealing with longer, more complex projects such as term papers and reports.

IV

A friend and much-respected colleague, Sam Watson, Jr., has said: "As we ask ever more intently what it is we know about writing as product, as process...we may find it increasingly difficult to specify what we do know, and we might even convince ourselves that we know less and less, rather like the rifleman who stares so intently at his target that it disappears."[16] Recent concern with research on the composing process represents one of the most positive trends in composition studies in, I would venture to say, decades. We need to support this research, study it, test it against our own experiences, apply it in our classrooms. At the same time, however, we must not underestimate or underutilize our own personal knowledge, our own experiences as writers and as teachers of writing.

This is far from easy. There is much in our present educational system which militates against the kind of development of personal expertise and involvement with students that I have been advocating--the large number of composition classes that too many of us teach; our TA system, which often pushes students into teaching before they have had even a semblance of adequate training; our increasing dependency upon and exploitation of part-time staff; the still fairly

low regard with which composition teaching is held by our profession as a whole. As difficult as it is, we need to maintain a double focus: we need to continue struggling to advance our empirical and theoretical knowledge of the composing process, yet not forget the importance of both nurturing and sharing our own personal knowledge of the very art that we propose to teach. Only thus can we avoid becoming living exemplars of the maxim that "those that can, do; and those that can't, teach."

Notes

[1] Sharon Crowley, "Components of the Composing Process," CCC, 28(May 1977), 168.

[2] Linda Flower and John Hayes, "The Dynamics of Composing: Making Plans and Juggling Constraints" in Cognitive Processes in Writing, ed. L. Gregg and I. Steinberg (forthcoming), p. 3.

[3] Nancy Sommers, "Reply to Sharon Crowley," CCC, 29(May 1978), 210.

[4] James M. McCrimmon, Writing With A Purpose (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1976), p. 5.

[5] Theodore F. Simms, Revising The Theme: Theory and Practice (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), p. 1.

[6] J. Harold Janis, College Writing: A Rhetoric and Handbook (New York: Macmillan, 1977), p. 31.

[7] Sheridan Baker, The Practical Stylist (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1977), p. 2.

[8] Baker, pp. 2-4.

[9] Nancy Sommers, "Revision Strategies of Student Writers and Experienced Writers." Paper presented at the 1978 MLA convention in New York City, p. 5.

[10] Sommers, "Revision Strategies," p. 5.

[11] Sommers, "Revision Strategies," p. 9.

[12] Charles R. Cooper and Lee Odell, Research on Composing: Points of Departure (Urbana, Ill.: NCTE,1978).

[13] Michael Polanyi, Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1962), p. 206.

[14] Sharon Crowley had her students keep what she calls composition diaries. See her article in CCC, cited above, as well as Nancy Sommers' response, also cited above.

[15] Donald Murray's recent article, "Write Before Writing," in the December, 1978 issue of CCC (pp. 375-81) is an excellent example of the insights that can result when a person with these rare qualities looks at writing.

[16] Sam Watson, Jr., "A Reason for Writing as an Evaluation Tool." Paper presented at the 1979 Conference on English Education in Pittsburgh, PA.